

Shimunek, Andrew: *Languages of Ancient Southern Mongolia and North China – A Historical-Comparative Study of the Serbi or Xianbei Branch of the Serbi-Mongolic Language Family, with an Analysis of Northeastern Frontier Chinese and Old Tibetan Phonology.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017, 519 pp., ISBN: 978-3-447-10855-3.

Reviewed by **Julia Escher** and **Yves Trachsel**, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich, Zürichbergstr. 4, 8032 Zürich, Switzerland. E-mail: julia.escher@uzh.ch; yves.trachsel@aioi.uzh.ch

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2018-0039>

In this publication, Andrew Shimunek aims to construct a scientific and comprehensive theory on the origin of the Mongolic and Serbi languages, an often-debated subject in the scholarly community. Prior to this study, he published a variety of works in areas such as Mongolian phonology and lexicology as well as the linguistic reconstruction of Kitan. This publication is based on the author's 2006–2009 field-work and the ensuing PhD dissertation (2013). Shimunek puts forth a new Serbi-Mongolic language family theory, named the “Serbi-Mongolic divergent language theory”. He sets out to prove his theory based on methods of historical-comparative linguistics, combined with an additional careful philological reading of transmitted sources. The author also includes a great variety of materials, such as Chinese dynastic histories, Old Tibetan manuscripts, epitaphs written in Kitan script, and Mongol inscriptions.

The publication at hand is composed of ten chapters: 1. Previous Theories on the Origins of the Mongolic Languages (pp. 1–35), 2. A Brief Ethnolinguistic History of the Serbi-Mongolic Peoples (pp. 37–77), 3. Early Northern Frontier Varieties of Chinese (pp. 79–108), 4. Notes on the Phonology of Old Tibetan (pp. 109–119), 5. Taghbach and other Middle Serbi Dialects of the Northern Wei (pp. 121–168), 6. The T'u-yü-hun ('Azha) Language (pp. 169–196), 7. The Kitan Language (pp. 197–281), 8. Toward a Reconstruction of Common Serbi-Mongolic (pp. 283–382), 9. The Proto-Serbi-Mongolic Homeland (pp. 383–414), and 10. Conclusion (pp. 415–417).

Shimunek provides a careful and precise introduction to various theories on the origin of the Mongolic languages (chapter 1), which is especially useful for readers who are new to the field. Whenever he points out the weaknesses of some of these theories, he bases his criticism on solid arguments; on p. 13 for example, he states that the direct lineage theory of the Ancient Mongol Theory is no longer tenable, given the new materials and sources that have surfaced and as a result altered the current state of research. He formulates clear criteria for a comprehensive theory on the ethnolinguistic origins of the Mongols (pp. 32–34), and does not shy away from directly questioning established theories based on

earlier reconstructions of Old Chinese and Middle Chinese by scholars such as Karlgren (1957) and Pulleyblank (e. g. 1962a, 1962b, 1984, 1991). These and other newer reconstructions (e. g. Schuessler 2007) are often supplemented by his own approach, which has been strongly influenced by the work of Beckwith (e. g. 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008, 2010).

The author also gives a brief overview of the ethnolinguistic history of the Serbi-Mongolic peoples (chapter 2) relevant to this publication, i. e. the Taghbach (also known as Tuoba), the Tuyuhun, and the Kitan. He furthermore discusses the phonology of the various languages and dialects used in his materials and involved in his reconstructions, such as Old Tibetan or Taghbach (chapter 3–7). A great amount of attention is given to the Kitan language (chapter 7). Its phonology, morphology, and syntax is analyzed in great detail and further complemented by clear tables and examples. He presents a revised romanization of the Kitan Assembled Script and a reconstruction of Middle Kitan phoneme inventories. The provided list of the Kitan lexicon will certainly serve as a useful point of reference for future research.

Despite its obvious strengths, this publication exhibits some shortcomings in its suggested etymologies for several Mongolian words. Some of the presented examples about potential loanwords from Old Chinese into Serbi-Mongolic languages are in need of further scrutiny. One such case can be found on p. 386: Shimunek claims that *aruγ*, which denotes ‘basket, cage’ in Middle Mongol but later on underwent semantic narrowing and in Modern Khalkha Mongolian *apaɣ* now only refers to a specific type of basket used for collecting the dung of livestock, is a loan from Old Chinese 簋 *lǒu* ‘basket’, which he reconstructs as **ruɣ*. Unfortunately, he is too quick to dismiss a possible etymology linked to Khalkha *ap* ‘back, rear’ Middle Mongol *aru* out of semantic and phonological reasons. Given the fact that such ‘dung-baskets’ are always strapped on one’s back, a derivation of *aru* or possibly even an earlier unattested verb derived from *aru* by means of the common suffix *-γ/-g-* to form nouns designating results of actions¹ seems far more plausible. Lastly, the similarity between the denomination for the dung-basket *apaɣ* and the word for dung itself, *apɣan*, as well as the verb ‘to dry up’, *apɣax*, seems too striking to be left unexplained. Another example can be found on p. 404: Shimunek postulates an origin in Proto-Tibeto-Burman **ti* ‘water’ and even Early Old Chinese **ti* ‘water’ for Middle Mongol *čisu* ‘blood’. Although he provides a detailed explanation for the later Mongolic innovation **-sU* for loanwords, the etymology seems rather far-fetched for semantic reasons. This

¹ Poppe 2006: 45.

is further corroborated by the Leipzig-Jakarta list of basic vocabulary,² where both ‘water’ and ‘blood’ exhibit a high unborrowed score and are therefore highly unlikely to be borrowed. Lastly, Starostin, Dybo and Mudrak³ suggest that *čisu* is in fact of inner-“Altaic” origin going back to the Proto-Altaic form *čičūnu. They further add that *-n-* is often lost before the nominal suffix *-su* which then gave rise to the form of *čisu*. Although the Altaic theory is hotly debated in its own right, an inner-“Altaic” or inner-Mongolian origin seems far more likely than a loan from Chinese for a basic concept such as blood. In view of this, Shimunek’s etymology should be revised.

Another observation concerns the historical background on the Tuyuhun (p. 170), which neglects some of the available sources and deserves further elaboration. Shimunek’s overview leaves the reader with the impression that the Tuyuhun were more or less under constant Tibetan control, when in fact they functioned as a widely independent political entity since the middle of the fourth century.⁴ A close reading of transmitted historical sources indicates that Tibetan rulers as well as Sui-Tang China tried to gain influence among the Tuyuhun ruling elite through political marriage. During the rule of Nuohebo 諾曷鉢 (r. 635–672) for example, the Tuyuhun elite were probably divided into a pro-Tang and pro-Tibet faction and maintained marriage alliances with both sides.⁵

To conclude, Shimunek’s publication has shown that systematic regular sound correspondences did exist among the Taghbach, Kitan, Tuyuhun, and Mongolic languages. Moreover, a rich system of shared functional morphology among the Serbi and Mongolic branches can be identified, thereby pointing towards a relationship between the two daughter branches of Proto-Serbi-Mongolic (chapter 8). In Shimunek’s words (p. 416): “the current findings – the first rigorous and systematic, unified theory on the origins of the Mongolic and Serbi languages – add substantially to our understanding of the linguistic geography of early Eastern Eurasia, and to the ethnolinguistic history of the Mongolic peoples.” In addition, this well-structured publication is a solid starting point for further investigation into the field, e. g. research on other excavated texts (such as several epitaphs for members of the Tuyuhun ruling family). It might prove an invaluable source for future reference on Serbi-Mongolic languages, possible reconstructions and etymology.

² Tadmor 2009: 68ff.

³ Starostin et al. 2003: 401.

⁴ Yao Silian 1973: 54/810; Molè 1970: 76.

⁵ Ouyang Xiu/Song Qi 1975: 221A/6226; Lin Guanqun 2011: 249; Yamaguchi Zuihō 1983: 671–676.

Bibliography

- Beckwith, Christopher I. (2006a): “Comparative Morphology and Japanese-Koguryoic History: Toward an Ethnolinguistic Solution of the Altaic Problem”. *Altaistic Studies* 1: 125–137.
- Beckwith, Christopher I. (2006b): “Toward a Tibeto-Burman theory”. In: *Medieval Tibeto-Burman Languages II*. Edited by Christopher I. Beckwith. Leiden: Brill, 1–38.
- Beckwith, Christopher I. (2006c): “Old Tibetan and the dialects and periodization of Old Chinese”. In: *Medieval Tibeto-Burman Languages II*. Edited by Christopher I. Beckwith. Leiden: Brill, 179–200.
- Beckwith, Christopher I. (2008): “Old Chinese loanwords in Tibetan and the non-uniqueness of ‘Sino-Tibetan’”. In: *Medieval Tibeto-Burman Languages III*. Edited by C. I. Beckwith. Halle: IITBS GmbH, 161–201.
- Beckwith, Christopher I. (2010): “Old Chinese loanwords in Korean”. In: *Contemporary Korean Linguistics: International Perspectives*. Edited by Sang-Oak Lee. Seoul: Thaeaksa, 1–22.
- Karlgren, Bernhard (1957): *Grammata Serica Recensa*. Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities.
- Lin Guanqun 林冠群 (2011): *Tangdai tufan shi yanjiu* 唐代吐蕃史研究. Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe.
- Molè, Gabriella (1970): *The Tu-yü-hun from the northern Wei to the time of the Five Dynasties*. Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.
- Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 / Song Qi 宋祁 (1975): *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐書, 20 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Poppe, Nikolas (2006): *Grammar of Written Mongolian*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. (1962a): “The Consonantal System of Old Chinese (Part I)”. *Asia Major*, New Series 9.1: 58–144.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. (1962b): “The Consonantal System of Old Chinese (Part II)”. *Asia Major*, New Series 9.2: 206–265.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. (1984): *Middle Chinese: A Study in Historical Phonology*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. (1991): *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Schuessler, Axel (2007): *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Starostin, Sergei / Dybo, Anna / Mudrak, Oleg (2003): *Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages*. Leiden: Brill.
- Tadmor, Uri (2009): “Loanwords in the world’s languages: Findings and results”. In: *Loanwords in the World’s Languages. A Comparative Handbook*. Edited by Martin Haspelmath and Uri Tadmor. The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton, 55–75.
- Yamaguchi, Zuihō 山口瑞鳳 (1983): *Toban Ōkoku Seiritsu Shi no Kenkyū* 吐蕃王国成立史の研究. Tokyo: Yiwā Nami Shoten.
- Yao Silian 姚思廉 (1973): *Liang Shu* 梁書, 3 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.